



Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement

Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the classic book by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker: *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*. It can be used by individuals, small groups, or an entire faculty to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, and suggest steps that might be taken to promote the Professional Learning Community (PLC) concept in a school or district. This guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or to focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope that this guide proves to be a useful tool in your efforts to explore the PLC concept—a concept that has the power to transform schools.

Introduction

1. How do you define the term *professional*? Do you agree that a major responsibility of a professional is to remain current in the evolving knowledge base of the profession? When a clear picture of best practices emerges in a field and there is no longer any serious debate about the effectiveness of those practices, would it be considered unprofessional to ignore that information?
2. Who are the learners in a professional learning community? One of the themes we will return to again and again is the assertion that most schools are organized as if their primary purpose is *teaching*; however, the most effective schools will embrace the premise that their primary purpose is to ensure high levels of *learning* for all students. This commitment to student learning naturally leads to the creation of a school culture where everyone is expected to learn and grow.
3. The authors explain that they made a conscious choice to use the term “learning *community*” rather than “learning *organization*.” Consider their argument. Which term do you prefer? Explain why.
4. The authors make the case that the PLC concept is grounded in solid research reflecting best practices not only from education, but also from the studies of leadership, business, and organizational development. They contend that

school practitioners can and should learn from organizations outside of education that have struggled with some of the same issues facing education today, and they cite examples of those issues. Do you believe educators can learn from the successful practices of the private sector?

Chapter 1

The Disappointment of School Reform

1. This chapter provides a historical overview of past efforts to reform American public education. What are some of the factors that have contributed to the failure of these efforts? Have schools failed to show significant gains because educators are not working hard enough or because they are indifferent to the welfare of students? Is it self-evident that educators must discover new conceptual models that enable them to work smarter rather than simply harder in systems that are outdated and ineffective given our contemporary challenges?
2. What is your reaction to the following statement: “If teachers and principals believe the impetus for student learning remains outside their sphere of influence and that there is nothing they can do to overcome these variables, the idea of school improvement will undoubtedly seem futile, if not downright ridiculous.”

3. A guiding premise of this book is that despite the very real external issues and obstacles that impact schools, educators have the capability to take steps that will improve teaching and learning in their schools. Do you agree with that premise?

Chapter 2

A New Model: The Professional Learning Community

1. This chapter contends that schools have been based on the “factory model” with an emphasis on centralization, standardization, hierarchical top-down management, a rigid sense of time, and accountability based on adherence to rules and regulations. What evidence can you cite in your own experience to support that contention?
2. Do you agree that a model based on the premise that schools exist to help sort and select students according to their innate ability and/or socioeconomic status is not well suited to the new purpose of helping all students achieve at high levels?
3. Consider the Connie Donovan scenario presented in this chapter. Do you think the school culture in which she is working is desirable? Is it preferable to current conditions in schools? Do you think it is feasible? Is it possible for schools to create such a culture? Explain your answers.

4. Review the different elements in the Connie Donovan scenario. Which would require additional funding before a school could move forward with implementation? Which could be initiated without substantial new funding?

Chapter 3

The Complexity of the Change Process

1. This chapter presents the argument that substantive change is inherently difficult and filled with the uncertainty, anxiety, and problems that typically lead to conflict. Do you believe that if the change process is managed correctly it can proceed smoothly and avoid these pitfalls?
2. Consider an initiative in your school that failed. Which of the eight common mistakes cited by Kotter (1996) contributed to that failure? Was the demise of the initiative a result of something Kotter did not identify?
3. Kotter contends that most people are too complacent to initiate change unless leaders create a sense of urgency, yet efforts such as *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which was designed to create a sense of crisis, have failed to have much impact. The authors offer what they believe is a better alternative for persuading people to participate in the change process. What is their proposal?

Chapter 4

Building the Foundation of a Professional Learning Community: Mission and Vision

1. This chapter describes four different schools that proclaim it is their mission to help all kids learn; nevertheless, the schools operate under very different assumptions. Which of the four stated assumptions is closest to the actual practice in your own school?
2. A premise of this chapter is that the actual mission of a school is not revealed in the wording of the mission statement, but rather in the practices, procedures, and assumptions that drive the day-to-day workings of the school. Can you identify a practice in your school that is inconsistent with the stated mission of helping all kids learn at high levels?
3. When *Professional Learning Communities at Work* was published, the authors knew that schools that truly embrace a mission of learning for all would focus on two critical questions:
 - What is it we want all students to learn?
 - How will we know when each student has mastered the intended learning?

Two more questions have since been added to that list:

- How will we respond when a student does not master the intended learning?
- How will we respond when a student has already learned it?

Assess your school in each area. Could staff members at your school articulate a clear and consistent response to these questions that demonstrates a commitment to learning?

1. Describe what happens in your school when a student has initial difficulty learning. How quickly can the student be identified? How timely is the response? How directive is the response? Is the student offered additional time and support for learning? Does the school ensure that the student puts in the extra time and benefits from the extra support? How systematic is the response? Is every student entitled to extra time and support regardless of who the teacher might be? [For a study of schools that have been extremely effective in promoting student learning through systematic interventions, read *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn* (2004) available from Solution Tree, 800-733-6786, www.solution-tree.com.]

5. Professional Learning Communities build shared vision by building *shared knowledge* of the current reality in the school as well as examining best practices for helping students learn at high levels. List information that would be helpful in building shared knowledge about the current reality in your school (student achievement data, perception data, results of follow-up studies, discipline data, the percentage of students engaged in different programs, etc.).

6. Consider the characteristics of an effective vision statement that are listed on page 86. Assess the vision statement for your school or department on the basis of these characteristics.

Chapter 5

Building the Foundation of a Professional Learning Community: Values and Goals

1. What is the distinction that the authors draw between vision statements and value statements?
2. Write examples of key value statements for a faculty that are consistent with the guiding principles given on pages 95–98.
3. Since the publication of *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, the authors have used the concept of SMART goals to help educators understand the nature of goals in a PLC. SMART goals are:
 - S—Strategic (aligned with district goals) and specific in language
 - M—Measurable
 - A—Attainable
 - R—Results-Oriented (focused on the results we seek rather than on activities; focused on the end rather than the means)
 - T—Time-Bound (they specify when the goal is to be achieved)

Write a SMART goal and complete the planning worksheet that appears at the end of this study guide.

4. Draw four pillars representing the foundation of a PLC and label each pillar with one of the following designations: mission, vision, values, and goals. What is your understanding of the questions each pillar raises in a PLC? Why would inattention, ambiguity, or confusion over any one of the pillars make it more difficult to build a PLC?

Chapter 6

Sustaining the School Improvement Process

1. Mission, vision, values, and goals will come to life in an organization only if their importance is communicated on an ongoing basis. This chapter identifies seven questions (beginning on page 107) that help leaders communicate the priorities of an organization. Apply these questions to your own school setting. How effective is the communication in your school? Discuss the questions with a colleague and compare his or her assessment with your own.
2. Consider the four prerequisites for promoting a collaborative culture found on pages 121–129. Use the seven keys of effective communication

as a guide to developing strategies for creating those four conditions in your school.

Chapter 7

Embedding Change in the Culture of a School

1. What is the distinction between restructuring and reculturing that the authors identify in this chapter?
2. Design a plan for celebrating in your school that is specifically intended to shape the culture of the school. Use the tips for celebration on pages 144–146 to assess your plan.
3. What points are the authors attempting to make in drawing the analogy between shaping culture and planting a garden?

Chapter 8

Planning for Learning: Curricular Focus in a Learning Community

1. This chapter begins with the assertion that “until a school has clarified what students should know and be able to do and the dispositions they should acquire as a result of schooling, its staff cannot function as a

professional learning community.” Does providing each teacher with a copy of state standards and district curriculum guides ensure that every teacher is clear on the intended outcomes of the curriculum? What other steps would a PLC take to ensure this clarity?

2. Consider the five assumptions regarding curriculum development listed on page 155. Do you agree with these assumptions? Is the curriculum of your school aligned with these assumptions?
3. The authors contend that “the major flaw in the *de facto* curriculum of American public schools is not that schools do not do enough, but that they attempt to do too much.” What is the process for the elimination of content from the curriculum in your school? Can you identify a strategy that improves upon the existing situation?
4. In working with schools across the country, the authors have concluded that the single biggest way to build momentum for the PLC concept in a school is having teams of teachers work together to:
 - Clarify essential outcomes and a recognized indicator of proficiency for each of the outcomes to be assessed
 - Develop frequent and timely common formative assessments of student mastery of those outcomes
 - Work together on a routine basis to analyze the results of those assessments
 - Develop strategies for improving on those results

Is this system of frequent common formative assessments of each student's mastery of essential learning in place in your school? Do teachers work together to analyze data, identify areas of concern, and implement improvement strategies? If not, what obstacles have prevented you from initiating this powerful process to improve student learning? How have other schools been able to overcome these obstacles? How could you overcome these obstacles in your school?

Chapter 9

The Role of the Principal in a Professional Learning Community

1. How do the authors attempt to resolve the paradox of the competing images of effective principals: strong, forceful instructional leaders who impose their vision on their schools versus facilitators who empower teachers to make many of the important decisions regarding their schools?
2. Apply the concept of simultaneous loose-tight leadership to your own school. Provide examples of a few key concepts that the principal and staff should “hold tight” at the same time they provide for significant individual autonomy within that area.
3. This chapter tells a story of how a principal dealt with a staff member who seemed to ignore the school's commitment to ensuring the success

of all students. Analyze and assess the principal's response. Do you concur with the authors that this kind of response offers "the best hope both for advancing an improvement initiative and for recruiting resisters to follow that initiative"?

4. The authors quote Kouzes and Posner (1996) in defining "the golden rule of leadership." What is that rule? Can you cite an example in your own experience where that rule has been violated?
5. How do effective principals use data?
6. Principals often contend that they are too busy doing their jobs to focus on building learning communities. Yet, in *Leading Learning Communities* (2001) and in *Breaking Ranks II* (2004), both the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals call upon principals to *define* their jobs as leaders of learning communities. Make a list of all the things you are doing that are more important than building the capacity of your staff to function as a PLC.

Chapter 10

Teaching in a Professional Learning Community

1. Review the standards developed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (on pages 210 and 211) and the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (beginning on page 211). Do you disagree with any of the standards presented? What is in place to monitor the presence or absence of these standards in your own school?
2. A critical characteristic of teachers in a PLC is their focus on *learning* rather than on *teaching*. What is in place in your school to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis and to ensure that students who are struggling are provided with extra time and support for learning?
3. Consider the six ways that the work of teachers will change in a PLC as explained on pages 216–229. Which, if any, of these changes do you feel the teachers of your school would welcome?
4. Replicate the exercise described on pages 226 and 227 by asking a group of staff members to describe the very best leader they have ever worked with and another group to describe the very best teacher they ever had. Are the responses similar?

5. In *Leading for Results* (2004), Dennis Sparks, executive director of the National Staff Development Council, contends that two of the greatest obstacles to school improvement are teacher resignation (“we just can’t get better results with these kids”) and teacher dependency (“someone else needs to solve the problems we face in our school”). John Gardner (1988) contends that “the taking of responsibility is at the heart of leadership.” What steps might be taken to reduce teacher resignation and dependence and encourage teachers to function as leaders who accept responsibility for student learning?

Chapter 11

The Role of Parents in a Professional Learning Community

1. Consider Michael Fullan’s observation at the beginning of the chapter that parent involvement in the education of their children does not happen by accident or invitation, but rather by explicit, strategic intervention. Describe the explicit, strategic plan your school uses to involve parents in the education of their children.
2. Consider each of the six standards for parent involvement developed by the National Parent/Teacher Association (beginning on page 239). Create an action plan to improve upon each of the areas in your school.

3. What is in place in your school to solicit information, perceptions, and concerns from parents rather than to simply communicate your position to them?

Chapter 12

Staff Development in a Professional Learning Community

1. What are the three components of staff development that must be considered if a school is to meet the standards established by the National Staff Development Council?
2. What is the primary criterion by which a PLC will assess the effectiveness of its staff development program? How might you use that criterion in assessing the effectiveness of the staff development program in your own school?
3. Describe the concept of “job-embedded professional development” presented by the authors. What steps could you take to make job-embedded professional development the norm in your school?
4. This chapter presents several specific steps a central office might take to promote the PLC concept in district schools. Use those steps in

considering ways that your central office could support the PLC initiative in your school. Is it possible for an individual school to create a PLC without the support of the central office?

5. Use the characteristics of a renewing organization described by Waterman (1987) on pages 274 and 275 as a lens for looking at the practices in your school. What steps could you take to promote these characteristics in your own setting?

Chapter 13

Passion and Persistence

1. Is your school improvement effort focused exclusively on raising test scores, or does it appeal to the heart by providing evidence of success, building collaborative relationships, and constantly reminding staff of their ability to make a significant difference in the lives of their students?
2. Read pages 282–287 and answer the final question posed by the book: Do we believe in our collective capacity to create a better future for our school?

3. What are the most important steps that need to be taken to drive PLC concepts deeper into the culture of your school? Are you prepared to take those steps?

Student Achievement SMART Goal Setting Worksheet

Team Name: _____ Team Leader: _____

Identify a student achievement SMART goal for your team (a goal that is Strategic/Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound): _____

Action Steps	Designation	Time Frame	Results
What steps or activities will be initiated to achieve this goal?	Who will be responsible for initiating or sustaining the action steps?	What is a realistic time frame for each phase of the activity?	What evidence will you present to show that you are making progress toward your goal?
What products will be created?			

References

- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes: How professional learning communities respond when kids don't learn*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree (formerly National Educational Service).
- DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree (formerly National Educational Service).
- Gardner, J. (1988). *Leadership: An overview*. Washington, DC: Independent Sector.
- Kotter, (1996). *Leading change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (1996). Seven lessons for leading the voyage to the future. In F. Hesselbein, M. Goldsmith, & R. Beckhard (Eds.), *The leader of the future* (pp. 99–110). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- National Association of Elementary School Principals. (2001). *Leading learning communities: Standards for what principals should know and be able to do*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2004). *Breaking ranks II: Strategies for leading high school reform*. Reston, VA: Author.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). *A nation at risk*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Sparks, D. (2004). *Leading for results: Transforming teaching, learning, and relationships in schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.